



A Century of Composition by Women Music Against the Odds

Edited by
Linda Kouvaras
Maria Grenfell
Natalie Williams

palgrave
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This book is dedicated to all composers who have worked “against the odds”—especially those who are women.

FOREWORD

This remarkable volume captures a wide diversity of music-making practice by women in the western world through the last one hundred years. It documents and explores many challenges to success that have been faced, the ways in which some of those challenges have been overcome and many of the issues that remain. It also goes some way to identifying the lasting impact that many women's music has had upon cultural identity, impact that has been frequently underestimated in existing literature.

We hear here the voices of composing women from particular times and places, and the voices of women writing in today's sociocultural situations. Reading these accounts, we may be impressed by extraordinary individuals, heartened by positive shifts towards a more egalitarian world, frustrated by the incremental pace of those shifts, and also confronted by cold industry realities of then and now. Presented with hard statistics that demonstrate in no uncertain terms that the gender gap has persisted even though in some areas it has reduced a little, we may also learn much from those who have found ways to make space and recognition for women's music.

This collection includes writing about a range of musical creative outputs, from overtly "female" to those activities that are not specifically gendered yet which are typically seen through a male-dominated lens. We are reminded that femininity is not the "negative" or "opposite" of masculinity, and it remains clear that the recent and important increase of dialogue in regard to prejudice against non-binary and trans artists does not reduce the necessity for ongoing feminist debate; in fact, the opposite is true.

In addressing gender disparity, it is heartening to read of the real benefits that come from the simple act of asking people to consider gender issues. Becoming aware of our unconscious biases, rather than pretending we don't have them, helps us to embrace a more diverse artistic world. These writings encourage us to strive to change our world, so that it no longer forces women to omit their first names in order to gain access to opportunities. We could all gain more if our musical "meritocracy" encouraged relational connections and a celebration of difference rather than rewarding blind ambition; the latter, sooner or later, causes distress to all.

Here we are presented with tales of women who achieved a great deal, yet whose output was all too often unsung or bypassed. Whether their music was largely confined to the domestic (not that there is anything wrong with a domestic focus if that is chosen), whether the few widely recognised women composers were treated as exceptions and therefore set up to be discounted, or whether the involvement of a male in a collaborative project automatically detracted from female contributions, we can read here just some of the many ways in which long shadows have been cast across women's musical successes.

In 2019, after 97 years of male leadership of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM), I found myself elected first female President of the ISCM, having also been the first female Vice-President (elected at the same time the organisation gained its first female Secretary General). That it took so long for the pattern of male leadership to be broken is simply shocking. Yet there was a lot of male-dominated history to address. Looking back to the ISCM festival of my birth year (1960), I see a ten-day programme featuring music written by 40 men and one woman. The festival organising committee (based in Köln) involved 18 men and no women. Of the 24 national sections, 2 (Poland and Norway) had female presidents. I am happy to report that gender disparity in represented composers has been far less in recent ISCM festivals; most notably, the 2017 festival in Vancouver set out to achieve gender parity and very nearly achieved it. Furthermore, as the society has become more truly international, we are not just exploring gender norms in western society but across many more cultural bases.

In seeking to understand how gender disparities arise, let us not forget that by far the majority of human individuals experience relationship with the maternal as primary, and our relationship with our fathers is generally quite different. This simple fact underpins and to some extent explains—but

does in no way excuse—fundamental differences in our apprehension of the feminine in comparison to the masculine. Overcoming that takes effort and self-awareness, and a breadth of understanding to which this volume contributes much.

In *A Century of Composition by Women: Music Against the Odds*, we hear the voices of the women who are creators, scholarly commentators, performers, activists, mentors and leaders. Listening to them will transform us all.

Auckland, New Zealand

Glenda Keam

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors would like to acknowledge the contributing authors whose painstaking and enlightening work has shaped the conceptual dimensions of our book, and which shines a torch on the myriad aspects of composing women. Our authors wear many “hats” as they bring their expertise to bear on this collection: they are, variously—and sometimes simultaneously—musicologists; composers; festival promoters; concert curators; educators; radio programmers, producers and directors; mentors and performers.

We thank the Australian National University for their support of the 2017 international research conference, Women in the Creative Arts (director: Associate Professor Natalie Williams; programming committee: Williams, Associate Professor Linda Kouvaras, Associate Professor Maria Grenfell, Dr Katy Abbott, Professor Samantha Bennett, Dr Lucy Neave, Dr Martyn Jolly, and Dr Kit Devine), which catalysed the publication of this essay collection. The support of both the Gender Institute and the College of Arts & Social Sciences at the Australian National University, enabled the conference. The editors also thank Professor Will Christie, Head, Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University’s Research School of Humanities & the Arts, and Dr Kate Bisshop-Witting, formerly the School Manager of the School of Music.

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Finally, we three co-editors would like to express our deep appreciation of working together!—shrouded in occasional insect-thwarting scarves, with bold, but oblivious, keyboard-traversing felines (we're looking at *you*, Crispin), as we Zoomed away countless late-night hours, across state-lines and international borders, over the last three years, in preparing this volume. Our happy synergy and inspiring interactions were an ebullient example of the magic that results from the collaborative efforts of dedicated creative women.

Linda Kouvaras
Maria Grenfell
Natalie Williams

KEYWORDS

Women Composers
Feminist Musicology
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Composition Mentoring
Practice-led Research
Music Collaborations

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Natalie Williams a composer and academic, recently served as Interim Dean at the School of Music, Art, and Theatre at North Park University, Chicago. Academic teaching positions include the Australian National University and the University of Georgia (USA). Her published research focuses on post-tonal music, music theory pedagogy and the work of women in the creative arts.

Her music has been commissioned and performed across Australia, Europe and the United States. Williams's first symphony premiered to critical acclaim in August of 2014; a multimedia symphony premiered by the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra. Winner of the 2020 Sue Willgoss Chamber Music Composition Prize at the University of Sydney, the 2018 Albert H. Maggs Award from the University of Melbourne, and the Judith Lang-Zaimont prize from the International Alliance of Women in Music (2016), she was the inaugural composer commissioned by Musica Viva's *Hildegard Project* in 2015, a commissioning program championing the music of women. In 2017 she directed an international research conference, Women in the Creative Arts, at the Australian National University, School of Music. Commercial recordings of her music include releases on ABC Classics (2021), Albany Records, New York (2014) and Wirripang Records (2011).

Williams holds a doctoral degree in Music Composition (2012) from Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music and a Graduate Certificate of Management (2018), completed at the Australian National University. She is a fellowship member of the Higher Education Academy (UK) and a full writer member of the Australasian Performing Rights Association.

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CHAPTER 1

Composing Women's (Very) Long 100-Year Fight: Evolutions, Illuminations, Solutions

Linda Kouvaras

INTRODUCTION

This collection of 22 essays, authored by musicologists, composers and performers, celebrates musical composition by (primarily) cis-women working in Western-based idioms.¹ Positioned within the recent worldwide resurgence in feminist focus, the book presents creative processes and contextual issues pertaining to current-day and early-twentieth-century composers: their rich compositional voices and the testing—to say

¹The majority of the chapters build extensively on papers presented at two research conferences on gender and music presented in 2017 and 2018, respectively: “Women in the Creative Arts” Conference, August 10–12, 2017, School of Music, Australian National University, Canberra, <http://music.cass.anu.edu.au/news-events/news/women-creative-arts> and “Gender Diversity in Music-Making” Conference, July 6–8, 2018, Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music, Monash University, Melbourne, <https://www.monash.edu/muma/public-programs/previous/2018/the-gender-diversity-in-music-making-conference>.

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the least—scenarios in the professional settings in which these creators disseminate their work. *A Century of Composition by Women: Music Against the Odds* balances women’s narratives of struggle, of artistic prowess, and of “breaking through” the obstacles in their professional course.

Chapters are grouped into three parts: Part I, “Creative Work—Then and Now,” presenting historical and present-day investigations of women’s composition; Part II, “The State of Industry in the Present Day,” viewed through the creation of new music by women; and Part III, “Creating; Collaborating: Composer and Performer Reflections,” offering personal accounts of current music creation. The book’s tripartite makeup is reflective of the concerted recent “push” towards revolution in raising the profile of composition by women.²

The historical prejudice against creative women participating in the professional music sphere is vividly exemplified in this early example from 1882, where a critic writing in *The Musical Times* declared: “A woman who, when taking a pencil, pen or music-sheet, forgets what are the character and obligations of her sex, is a monster who excites disgust and repulsion ... They are neither men nor women, but something which has no name and no part in life.”³ Women have been composing for as long as men have—but it is only in the past 100 years or so that their

² Some recent titles here include Siobhan McAndrew and Martin Everett, “Symbolic Versus Commercial Success Among British Female Composers,” in *Social Networks and Music Worlds*, ed. Nick Crossley, Siobhan McAndrew and Paul Widdop (New York: Routledge, 2014), 61–88; Laurel Parsons and Brenda Ravenscroft, eds, *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers: Secular & Sacred Music to 1900* (London: Oxford University Press, 2018); Michael K. Slayton, ed., *Women of Influence in Contemporary Music: Nine American Composers* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010); and Roxane Prevost and Kimberly Francis, “Teaching Silence in the Twenty-First Century: Where Are the Missing Women Composers?” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Censorship*, ed. Patricia Hall (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018): 637–60. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199733163.013.26>. Also see Susanna Eastburn, “We Need More Women Composers—and It’s Not About Tokenism, It’s About Talent,” *The Guardian*, March 6, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/mar/06/sound-and-music-susanna-eastburn-we-need-more-women-composers-talent-not-tokenism>, and Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore, “Beyond the ‘Dead White Dudes’: How to Solve the Gender Problem in Australian Classical Music,” *The Guardian*, August 20, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/aug/20/beyond-the-dead-white-dudes-how-to-solve-the-gender-problem-in-australian-classical-music>.

³ An 1862 critic writing in *The Musical Times*, cited in Paula Gillet, “Introduction: Music and the Female Sphere,” in *Musical Women in England, 1870–1914: Encroaching on All Man’s Privileges* (New York, Saint Martin’s Press, 2000), 25.